

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Case File No.: AA-79859

EA No.: AK-040-99-029

Type of
Action: Mining Claim Occupancy

Location: T. 27 S., R. 12 E., Sections 23, 24 and 26, KRM

Applicant: Dan and Cindy Plano
P.O. Box 878275
Wasilla, AK 99687

Mining
Claimants: James and Irene Norcross
P.O. Box 242
Willow, AK 99687

Prepared
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Preparing
Office: Bureau of Land Management
Anchorage Field Office
6881 Abbott Loop Road
Anchorage, Alaska 99507

Date: September 13, 1999

I. INTRODUCTION

On May 22, 1998, the Anchorage Field Office received a multi-year Alaska Placer Mining Application from Dan and Cindy Plano. Residential occupancy is listed as a necessary component of their mining operation.

On October 2, 1996, Mr. Plano filed with this office a notification of an existing occupancy on a Federal mining claim. Additionally, on May 3, 1998, an occupancy worksheet was submitted to BLM.

Approximately five unpatented Federal mining claims are held by James and Irene Norcross, who have a purchase/lease agreement with the Plano's. The Plano's are slowly paying for the ownership of the claims from the profits generated from their mining operation. The mining claims are located on Anvil Creek, near Ophir, Alaska. The property is connected to the village of Takotna by a rough system of narrow dirt roads.

The Plano family has been conducting medium scale placer mining every summer since 1989. The mining operation uses a Cat D8 bulldozer, TD-24 bulldozer, #4 Northwest dragline, track-hoe, Lorraine crane, a small hydraulic giant and a large mobile grizzly/wash plant. The operation currently employs one equipment operator and a cook. They have filed a 3809 mining notice through the State of Alaska Placer Mining Application process every year since 1989. They currently have 15 acres of ground being actively mined.

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action:

Dan and Cindy Plano have requested an occupancy authorization for continuing use and occupancy in order to conduct ongoing gold placer mining activities on nearby Federal mining claims.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan:

The proposed mining claim occupancy is within lands included in the Southwest Planning Area MFP, signed November 1981. One of the plan objectives (objective M-2), states that the Bureau provide opportunities for the development of locatable minerals throughout the planning area to meet the national demands for precious and strategic minerals. The Proposed Action is in conformance with this land use plan objective.

C. Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, Policies, Plans or Other Environmental Analyses:

The regulations for authorizing occupancies on Federal mining claims are established in 43 CFR 3715. As established by regulation, the NEPA analysis for mining claim occupancy authorization is considered separately from the 3809 Surface Management Regulations which considers mining impacts.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action:

The Proposed Action is to continue the mining claim use and occupancy of existing structures for the Plano family, in order for them to conduct placer mining activities on their leased Federal mining claims. The occupancy site consists of approximately 1 acre of cleared and leveled land containing five well maintained wood frame/log structures. The existing structures consist of a family residence, cook-house, log cabin, and two small storage sheds. A pit outhouse is used to deal with human waste. Kitchen water is piped out to sump pits. There is no proposal to build new structures on the mining claims. In order for the Plano family to continue the use and occupancy of the structures on their Federal mining claim, BLM must issue an occupancy authorization. The structures are within Sections 23, 24, and 26, T. 27 S., R. 12 E., Kateel River Meridian.

Access can be achieved by landing an aircraft on the 1,200 foot gravel airstrip on the property, or landing at the village of Takotna and driving approximately 20 miles to the property.

The proposed duration for the occupancy would be for the full year, including care-taking the property during the winter. While the Plano's have not resided on the property through the winter in the past, they are concerned about vandalism and theft of equipment, which has become an increasing concern in recent years.

B. No Action Alternative:

The only alternative is the No Action Alternative. Under this alternative the BLM would not authorize the proposed occupancy.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Critical Elements:

There would be no impacts to the following critical elements: Air Quality; ACECs; Environmental Justice; Farmlands; Floodplains; Invasive, Non-native Species; Native American Religious Concerns; Threatened and Endangered (T&E) Species; Wetlands/Riparian Zones; Wild and Scenic Rivers; Subsistence; or Wilderness.

B. Cultural:

The structures were constructed approximately 25 years ago for mining purposes. The structures have never been formally evaluated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, and because of their age, are not likely to be formally evaluated in the foreseeable future.

The structures are located 1/3 mile from the primary route of the National Iditarod Historic Trail.

C. Vegetation:

The vegetation consists mainly of black spruce, alder, willow, fireweed and various grasses. The surrounding uplands consist of black spruce/tundra. The land adjacent to the cabins consists of tailings and settling ponds from past and present mining. Most of the surrounding drainages have been subject to placer mining in the past.

D. Wildlife:

Wildlife in the area includes moose, caribou, black and brown bears, wolves, and various birds and small mammals. Regional wildlife densities are moderately low.

E. Subsistence:

No change in Federal Subsistence Management Program authority or implementation would occur from the Proposed Action. The Proposed Action will not significantly restrict subsistence uses, decrease the abundance of subsistence resources, alter the distribution of resources, or limit subsistence user access from currently existing conditions.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action:

There would be impacts to water quality from the production of grey water through kitchen and household activities. Grey water is usually disposed of through pipes leading to a sump pit where it would migrate down, merge, and be quickly diluted by the local groundwater.

Minor amounts of solid household and human waste would be produced. Household waste would consist primarily of kitchen waste. Minor amounts of household hazardous waste would be generated, primarily from the use of household cleaners and solvents. The existing pit outhouse would be used to deal with human waste.

Brush in the immediate vicinity of the structures would be cleared and the existing structures maintained. Structures create an elevated need for wild-land fire protection for the area. The existence of structures usually results in a designation of a full suppression level of fire management in the local fire protection management plan.

The presence of food or improperly disposed garbage will occasionally attract bears. Every once in a while a bear must be shot if it stays around and becomes a potential hazard. Some of the local miners will harvest a moose in the fall for subsistence purposes. There is approximately 1 acre of lost habitat, principally impacting small mammals and birds, created by the occupancy. Additionally, the noise and activity associated with the occupancy will tend to cause many wildlife species to avoid the site and relocate to other areas. However, there is no shortage of similar habitat in the region for impacted species to relocate to.

There will be no impacts by the Proposed Action to the Iditarod Trail which is 1/3 mile away and not directly visible from the camp.

B. Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

The principal impact of not authorizing the requested mining claim occupancy is there would be no Plano family occupancy on their leased Federal mining claims. Because of the remoteness of this location, mining is unlikely without a mining claim occupancy authorization. There is no local alternative housing or realistic opportunity to commute to the property. Additional impacts would be that brush in the immediate vicinity of the structures would not be cleared and the existing structures would not be maintained.

C. Cumulative Impacts:

There would be no cumulative impacts of the occupancy to local resources.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. List of Preparers

Carl Persson, Lead Preparer, Geologist (Certified Mineral Examiner #035)
Jeff Denton, Subsistence Coordinator
Bruce Seppi, T&E Species Coordinator
Donna Redding, Archeologist
Dave Kelley, 3809 Surface Management Coordinator